

A Short History of Powder Point Bridge

BY DAVID A. MITTELL, JR.

This account heavily relies on two sources: Margaret Kearney's "The Bridge across the Bay" in 2007 in "The Duxbury Book," and "The Bridge," by Bradford Burnham in 1987, also in "The Duxbury Book."

Duxbury Beach as a commercial venture leading to the building of the bridge begins in 1871, when the town agreed to sell 200 acres to Boston real estate developer Stephen Allen for \$3,100. Allen's plan was to build hundreds of cottage lots along the length of the beach. He had extensive holdings in Boston and an estate called "Allandale" in Jamaica Plain. In Duxbury, he built a large summer estate on the historic Standish lands. Allen's plans for Duxbury Beach fell through because of his losses in the Great Boston Fire of 1872 and in the Panic of 1873. In 1877, George Wright took the mortgage on the beach. The Wrights were northerners who came to great wealth in the cotton trade before and after the Civil War. They came to Duxbury in 1868 — acquiring the bankrupt George Weston's home, which had had a fire, and which they turned into a 48-room mansion bounded by the granite wall that today encloses the athletic fields of the new high and middle school. As Town Historian Tony Kelso has written, there has been nothing like the Wrights in Duxbury — before or since. They are remembered for their generosity to the town. But much of their wealth was rooted in slavery. In Duxbury, they were first businessmen, betting heavily on real estate and cranberries. The Wright Dam created a pond to flood their extensive bogs — all are now part of the town's conservation holdings.

The Gurnet Bridge Company was incorporated in 1887. The project was pushed forward by George Wright's nephew, William J. Wright, who wanted to put 263 houses on the beach. When the bridge was built between 1892 and 1895, Plymouth County, the town of Duxbury and Willie Wright each paid one-third of the \$30,000 cost. Said to be the longest wooden bridge in the world, it had several early names, including "Half-Mile Bridge" and "Highway to the Sea" before "Powder Point Bridge" took sway in the lingo.

Willie Wright's continuation of Stephen Allen's commercial vision for the beach fell in the Portland Gale of 1898, which demonstrated the beach's everlasting fragility. In 1926, three sizable houses Wright had built near High Pines were floated across the bay to Landing Road where they still stand. The work was done by Walter Prince, Duxbury's legendary mover of untold numbers of houses.

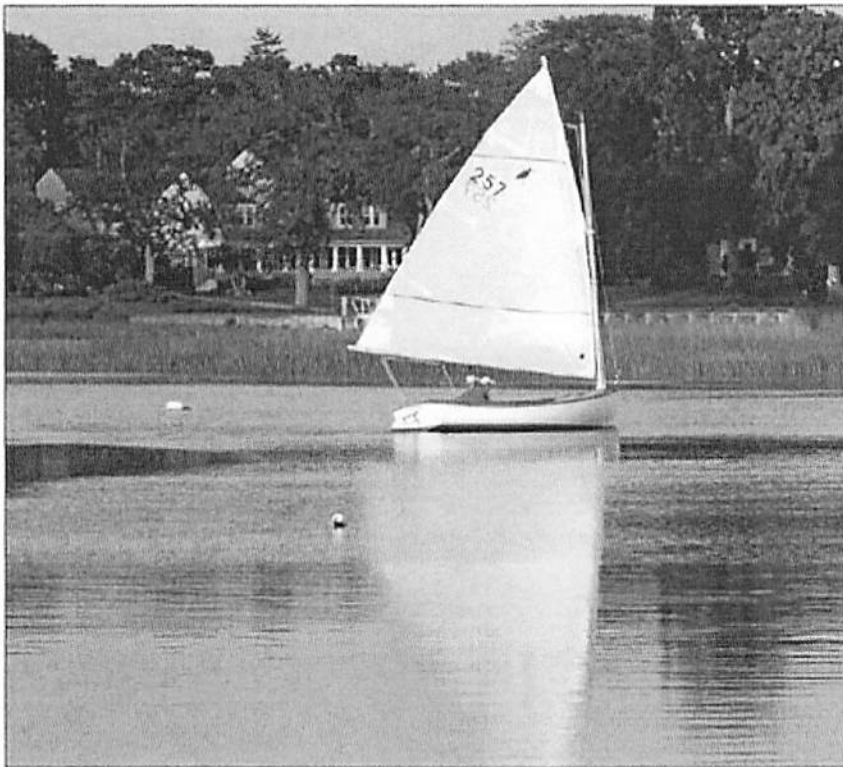
In 1904, the legislature transferred ownership of the bridge to Plymouth County, with repair costs divided into thirds: the county; Duxbury; and Kingston, Marshfield and Plymouth together. As costs rose, the non-Duxbury payers balked, and in 1941 the legislature transferred ownership to the town of Duxbury.

Along the way, in January 1936, a steamroller was successfully used to ram upwelling piles back into the muck. Piles were replaced in 1917, 1928 and 1938. The original draw — unmanned and operated by a crewman of the boat passing under — was abandoned; it was carried into the bay in a winter storm in 1957.

The town kicked the can of repair down the road for a very long time. In 1985, a fire led to a serious inspection and the closing of the bridge by the state on July 25 of that year.

“Build Your Own Bridge” (BYOB) had been advocating what its name suggests since 1975. In 1986, Town Meeting agreed — appropriating \$3 million to construct an entirely new bridge whose piles would be of impervious tropical hardwood. Ten-thousand percent inflation of the \$30,000 of 1892 would give us a bridge that would outlast the living. Ha!

In the winter of 2015, many of the piles were damaged by shifting ice. Repairs have failed. It is not certain to what extent the contractor, the subcontractor, the material used, its application — or the piles themselves — are failure’s true begetter. Litigation likely betides. In the end, the town may have to face building a third bridge or, maybe, finally give up on Willie Wright’s “highway to the sea.”



A catboat out for an evening sail soaks up the setting sunlight during the last days of summer.

Photo by Deni Johnson